

Personal Essay Contest 2021

<https://sites.google.com/email.vccs.edu/narrativeessaycontestspring21/home>

Since 2018, The Writing Center@PVCC has been hosting the Walt Kehoe English 111 Personal Essay Contest to celebrate the voices and stories of entering PVCC students. We are pleased to share with you the 2020 winners. These essays were all submitted as assignments in English 111 classes in the fall, summer, or spring 2020 semesters. Entries were read and scored anonymously by Writing Center tutors. This year, since the vast majority of the PVCC community are working and learning remotely, Writing Center staff designed a website in order share our winners' stories. The four winners and the six additional finalists are published here. We had many wonderful entries and selecting even these finalists was challenging. The eventual winners won us over through creative use of language, inventive storytelling, moving story, and distinctive voice. We invited the winners to meet with us prior to publication; otherwise, the essays appear here as they were submitted and reflect the work of developing writers.

We hope you enjoy them.

WINNERS

The following four essays were selected by the staff of the PVCC Writing Center out of the over 40 essays that were submitted. Each essay is preceded by an introduction by a Writing Center tutor. The essays appear in alphabetical order.

A Diminutive Giant – S. Colossi

A Simple Kind of Life – Reese Miller

Lessons Learned – Phoebe Hayashi

The Letter – Julia Grammer

FINALISTS

The following eight essays reflect individual tutor's favorite submissions to the Writing Center's fourth annual Personal Essay Contest. These student authors demonstrate memorable imagery, evocative descriptions and distinctive language. The following essays approach their respective topics with humor and depth, providing relatable insights and affecting introspection. The essays below are listed in alphabetical order.

Enjoy.

A Moment that Lasts a Lifetime – Keabetswe Leshoe

A Tale of Two Toys – Douglass “Puck” S. Hall

Burnt Toast – Thomas Caven

Nahor – Austen Coogan

Once Bitten – Benjamin Marcus

Running and the Effects it had on my Life – Stephanie Murran

Swim Lesson – Roger Newman

Under Pressure – Gavin Miller

A Diminutive Giant

Winner

By S. Colossi

Forward by Bret V

“A Diminutive Giant” is a thoughtful character portrait that commemorates its subject with detail and care. As the title suggests, this story challenges us to look beyond first impressions and consider how surface-level assumptions might obscure another person’s true nature. The friendship depicted in this story is similarly memorable, showing tough love, generosity, mentorship, and warmth. From its descriptive beginning to its moving conclusion, “A Diminutive Giant” stands tall.

Sometimes in life, if we are fortunate, we meet someone who makes us a better person. Through observation, interaction, or instruction, we are able to alter our course, and gain perspective on issues essential to how we conduct our lives, specifically: integrity, honesty, perseverance, and gratitude. That person may impact us so deeply that we may carry part of them along with us for life.

L.J. “Hap” Hoy was just such a person. Hap stood for Happy, a moniker attached to someone who came across initially as the grumpiest, most unhappy person on Earth. Hap was short in stature, at about five-feet six inches, with a somewhat diminutive frame, red hair, and green eyes. He was known, however, to control the room, and command attention when entering, with his long stride, and jaunty, energetic gait. He had a gruff manner, and spoke tersely, as though he had somewhere else he’d rather be; the first, and probably the second time I met him, I didn’t want anything to do with him. As the years passed, I wondered how I ever would have survived in the business world without him and his “Hard Knocks” school of life and commerce.

Hap was a retired Marine Fighter Pilot from the Vietnam Era. He once told me that he enjoyed “Blowing stuff up that belonged to the enemy”, and that he got so good at it, that they took him out of the cockpit, and made him a training officer-- precipitating his retirement. After returning home, Hap went to work for his brother at M.J. Hoy Construction Company doing small general contracting projects: schools, churches, banks, and shopping centers. When brother M.J. passed away, Hap took over,

and his reputation as a hard-nosed, but fair contractor with a reputation for integrity flourished.

In 1985, I started a small concrete contracting firm with shoestring funding and a few good men. Soon after, I had my first interaction with Mr. Hoy. I placed a bid through the local contractor's exchange with Hoy Construction for the site concrete on a small exterminator company expansion. The project was an all-inclusive, lump-sum bid, and I had inadvertently omitted a concrete driveway entrance in my price. After being awarded the contract,

and completing the work, I submitted my invoice to Hoy, adding the \$1,500 cost of the driveway. I promptly received a call from Mr. Hoy, and in his gruff tone was informed, in no uncertain terms, that the entrance wasn't in our contract, and that my mistake wasn't his problem. I would have to “eat” the shortfall, as he didn't have \$1,500 “lying around” to pay for it. I knew that in principle, Hoy was correct, and resolved to be more thorough during the bidding process moving forward. That turned out to be a valuable lesson in the years that followed, when estimating projects in the million dollar range.

Over the next year, my first full year of business, my firm, Atlantic Concrete Contractors, Inc. did multiple projects for Hoy, comprising nearly 80% of our business. Things were going well; I was learning the ins and outs of contracting under the wing of Mr. Hoy. Not long after that first year, contracts with Hoy began to wain noticeably, yet it was apparent that Hoy projects continued to crop around town. I called Hoy's office and asked to speak to him about it, but was told he wasn't available, only to be connected with Jim Craig, his Vice President. Upon inquiry, Jim told me that the reason my work with Hoy was dropping off was because Mr. Hoy had “Kicked me out of the nest” in order to see how I would do on my own for a while. At the time, I was hurt, and too naive to see the big picture; Mr. Hoy was preparing me for the future. I quickly developed an “I'll show him attitude”. Once again, another valuable life lesson was coming my way; Hoy was letting me know to never put all my eggs in one basket, and to never become complacent.

As the months passed without any new contracts from Mr. Hoy, I focused on expanding my client base. Working with contractors using various business models lent perspective as to how I wanted to operate in the future, what types of companies I wanted to do business with, and how to maneuver amongst my peers. We ample work on hand, and were moving in the right direction

Nearly a year later, post Hoy projects, my mobile phone rang one afternoon--Mr. Hoy was on the line. In typical Hoy fashion, with perhaps a little extra brusqueness, he barked, "I have a concrete contractor at First Virginia Bank, on Monticello Avenue, who fell on his ass; I need you to go over there and finish the job." I told him that I would go to his office and pickup some blueprints that afternoon, and quote him a price, to which he responded, "If I had wanted a goddamned price, I'd have asked you for one!", and promptly hung up the phone. I just sat there for a few minutes and smiled, glad to have the old buzzard back in my life.

We finished the job, and many more over the years; I built on what Hap had taught me as years went by--never putting all my eggs in one basket, being thorough in my estimating, always doing what I said I was going to do, and building a reputable company along the way.

Years later, Mr. Hoy called me to his office to speak with me--nothing unusual, as our relationship had taken on a certain ease. When I arrived, things felt differently, however, as Hap was lying on a red leather tufted sofa in his office. He informed me that he had recently been given six months to live, due to cancer. I couldn't hold back the tears--I was devastated. He explained that he looked at me as the son he never had, and that he was proud of what I had become in business, and as a man. I let him know that I appreciated everything he had done for me, and that I would continue to carry his legacy forward with integrity.

I learned many valuable life lessons from Mr. Hoy, and I am grateful for each of them. Perhaps the greatest of all is to never judge a book by its cover, as one never knows how memorable a person we might meet, or the potential giant impact they may have throughout our lives.

A Simple Kind of Life

Winner

By Reese Miller

Forward by Sarah G.

“A Simple Kind of Life” addresses the struggles of transitioning from childhood to adulthood. The writer goes from a child who rarely notices their environment to an adult who takes full advantage of their surroundings. This powerful essay follows the writer through her growth, and Emily, a tutor in the writing center, articulates the writer’s message as, “unique and interesting.” The use of descriptive language, a humble point of view, and a feeling of nostalgia all shine through in “A Simple Kind of Life.”

People don’t normally think of having less in their lives. For a lot of people, having a full life is like having the biggest and the best of anything you can imagine: big beautiful homes, fancy cars, the most advanced technology. Let's not mistake having the most in life for gaining the most from life.

As a young girl, I had an extraordinary imagination and would use it to create what my mom would refer to as a ‘huge mess’ in my bedroom. My brother, sister and I would always get ourselves into the most crazy predicaments. I remember colorful blankets of various sizes stretched over bed posts and little chairs, books piled on top of each chair to hold them steady; board game pieces and Lego bricks tossed about the room like chicken feed; And Teddy Graham crumbs and Goldfish dust on little tea set dishes surrounded by all my very favorite, stuffed party guests. This was the usual scene in the Miller house. Aside from making huge messes in the house us kids would spend a good amount of our time outside. We would build forts, take long treacherous hikes into the woods, and enjoy the freedom to just explore the land around us with little distractions, just simply taking it all in.

Having grown up with so much, and so many opportunities as a child was a privilege, which made becoming a teenager difficult. With all of the life-changing events that had taken place (moving around, graduating school, family issues, experimenting with various aspects of my life), I found myself clinging to material objects and items from my past, to feel more stable. I collected an abundance of trinkets, things I deemed

precious. And anything that was given to me from someone special, I always cherished. At first my collection was pretty solid; it was small and meaningful and I found comfort in having it. But in time my small collection grew to be quite big, large enough to fill an entire shed, and I started to feel overwhelmed by it all. I had gotten into a bad habit of thrift shopping and scrolling through Facebook Marketplace and Craigslist, searching for art supplies, things I thought were unique, or anything that could have been of use to me from the Free section.

One day as I was checking Facebook Marketplaces For Sale listings, I stumbled upon the best thing I could have possibly imagined finding. It was an old, tattered, canvas, cloth with a bundle of wooden lattice, a large plastic dome, and a door, better known as a Yurt. At the time I didn't really have a place of my own and was struggling to find a proper place to burrow. I even had an argument with my grandmother once over letting me turn the old playhouse my grandpa had built into a tiny house, but that didn't go over very well with her.

The 'glorified tent' was in pretty rough condition; it was nowhere close to perfect, but I knew it had some real potential. I could envision myself living in it like a witch in the woods, thriving off the pleasures of the land. It brought me back to building forts with my brother and sister and the joys of being a kid. I knew that this Yurt had the ability to bring back that enthusiastic child in me that I had somehow lost along the way. So I did the most logical thing I could do, and proceeded to buy the old worn and torn thing. Rebuilding the 12ft tall, 18ft wide, round structure wasn't easy, but I enjoyed the moments of hard work that went into it and the feeling of accomplishment after seeing what I had built.

The experience of buying and building my hobbit home has taught me a lot about how to appreciate the little things; like waking up to the morning light creeping in through the dome above my head and Wrens singing just outside my door. And with only enough power to turn on a light or charge a phone, no running water or shower and having to pee outside in the middle of the night, you learn a thing or two about how to be grateful for what you have. I no longer needed to fill a void to feel better or to hold onto those things that weighed me down. Because of my new found love for a more

simple kind of life, I got rid of a lot of the unnecessary baggage I had been collecting over the years. I felt lighter letting those things go and became more aware of my ability to find inner happiness and peace. A full and meaningful life isn't about how much you have; it's about enjoying what you are given in every moment.

Lessons Learned

Winner

By Phoebe Miller

Forward by Ruth Y.

In her thoughtful, self-aware essay, “Lessons Learned,” Phoebe Hayashi explores the process through which she revised an initial belief. From the first sentence, she places readers in the middle of quick-moving dialogue that mixes outer conversation with inner thoughts and reveals her frustration with the situation. Hayashi’s vivid language brings readers into the classroom with her as she navigates the revision of her belief that teachers are “amorphous people.” As she narrates the lesson learned, she reminds readers that those around us have lives that we may be unaware of, and, given the chance, they can teach us valuable lessons about our own complex humanity.

“...so get on that, all right?” my teacher said. I looked from the nod of agreement back to the teacher scrutinizing the attendance sheet.

Oh no. Please don’t go back to someone already called, I thought. “Haylie.” Drat! It’s been 10 minutes already. I slid further down in my seat.

“Phoebe.”

“Here!”

“Logan.”

“Here!” We’re done with a quarter. If we hurried, I thought.

“Charlie.” This could be done...

“Here!” ...before class is half done.

Pause. Just say the next name already. “Charlie, did you...” Argh! I stared at the opposite wall, resisting the urge to smack my face on the table. I needed my brain cells more than a dramatic display of aggravation. “...All right?” At the nod, she looked back at the paper. Her finger went up the list and – “Phoebe.” Oh, for Pete’s sake.

“Here. You already called me.”

My heart pounded in my ears at my audacity. When a teacher wears baggy jeans and oversized sweatshirts and comes up to your chest, that’s usually an indication of a weak teacher. But there was nothing weak about the look of exasperation directed at me before she continued with roll. Or about the way she asked me to stay behind after class was dismissed.

As I awkwardly stood in front of my teacher, I considered the asinine impulse that had led me to open my big mouth. Perhaps it was the 50-minute lesson on the use and importance of context clues, which combined extreme tedium with excessive humidity. Or maybe it was that time we sat in class after the bell rang and one-by-one repeated, “The teacher dismisses us, not the bell,” before being dismissed to charge down three flights of crowded stairs to fifth period.

Alternatively, I was being a brat. I lived vicariously through characters in the books I read, and the most stressful thing in my life was trying to catch the erratic public bus. My life’s plan was to get straight A’s through middle and high school, and graduate from any East Coast university with a degree that would help me earn a decent living. And at some point, I wanted to travel throughout Europe. All I expected of my teachers was they exert moderate control over the class and teach useful things.

After what felt like forever (and was probably two minutes at the most) she looked up from her papers at me. I looked back, considering if groveling apologies were in order. I was sorry, but not that sorry. She said, “Phoebe, I’d like you to cooperate with me.”

I’m pretty sure my face was a study. She took a deep breath and said that her job was hard enough without my smart remarks, she needed to make sure she didn’t miss anyone on roll so she went back to the last place she remembered calling, and I could understand that, right?

I didn’t, but plastered on my best fake smile, nodded agreeably, and hightailed it out of there. My attitude still left a lot to be desired, but it died a swift death two days later, when I came home from school to find that she had left a message on the phone,

saying, “Phoebe is a very diligent student. She’s very smart and I enjoy having her in my class. I believe she’ll go far in life.”

Until then, I had thought of my teachers as these amorphous people who stopped being people and became teachers as soon as they set foot on the campus. I hadn’t thought too hard about my English teacher having a separate class apart from fourth period, much less a personal life. My outrage over her involving my parents (even to praise me) turned to embarrassment at my own behavior, and a grudging admiration. She wasn’t paid to make me happy, nor was I her only problem, and she did exercise moderate control over the class and teach (sort of) useful things. My behavior sucked, and she tactfully refrained from pointing that out.

My penitence wasn’t up for apologizing, but I refrained from commentary, enthusiastically volunteered for lunch duty (anything to get out of class early) and thanked her at the end of the year for her present – and maybe for everything else as well. Because personal feelings aside, she taught me quite a bit: of how respect doesn’t require liking a person, how to embroider ideas to get symbolism from everything, and to suffer through reading Shakespeare for future college party discussions.

The Letter

Winner

By Julia Grammer

Forward by Zoe H.

In this uplifting story, Julia Grammer uses a unique incident to showcase the profound power of words. Julia's thoughtful voice shines through her writing as she explores past experiences and depicts them with an eloquent style; her descriptions create vivid scenes that draw the reader into the story. Julia shares a time when she received an opportunity to observe the significance of her words, and through that experience, she realizes how truly momentous they can be. Through Julia's reflection, she encourages readers to acknowledge the impact their own words have, and she urges them to use their voices for good.

A few days after my twenty-second birthday I received a letter. It was square and green, and postmarked from Ireland, though I was certain I didn't know anyone from there. It was odd receiving a letter at all. I rarely got mail that wasn't either junk mail offering deals on groceries or addressed to a previous tenant of the tiny, utilitarian apartment I shared.

I sat down on my bed, hearing the groaning protest of aging mattress springs, and bemusedly slit the envelope open. Inside was a bright yellow card with one word on it: Hello. Opening it, several sheets of paper fell into my lap. Unfolding them carefully and flipping the pages over, I realized the letter was from a woman I had attended high school with.

It was strange. I knew who she was; I recognized the name, Phoebe Morris, but I was baffled to receive a letter from her when we had rarely even spoken. She was just one of those people you would see in the hallway. As a teenager I always thought she was cool, certainly way too cool for me, a weird and awkward nerd, to be friends with.

As I began to read the letter, I only became more puzzled.

Phoebe was writing to thank me.

She began to describe a situation that stirred a faint memory. It emerged slowly, like an old fish rising from deep water. I remembered a wet afternoon, tucked into the corner of my favorite coffee shop, the rain flowing down the windows in long streams. Over the sound of the storm, I just caught a choked sob. Phoebe was huddled at the table next to mine, phone pressed to her ear, silent tears streaking down her cheeks.

“They said I shouldn’t even bother, that I’m not smart enough.”

A brief pause.

“I don’t know, what if they’re right?”

Another pause.

“I can’t do this. I’m just gonna fail.”

A sigh, a few more words, and then she hung up the phone, staring down at the table in front of her.

I hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but was hard not to. Her voice sounded hopeless, something all too familiar to me. I realized I had to make a choice. Be polite and pretend I hadn’t been listening in... or do what I was longing to do and say something.

I made my decision.

“Don’t listen to them.”

I was surprised to hear the firmness in my own voice.

“What?” She looked up at me, startled.

“Don’t listen to them,” I said again. “I believe in you.”

She gave me a small, forced smile. “Thanks.”

Soon after our brief exchange she left, and I put the incident out of my mind. I had almost forgotten it had ever happened until this unexpected letter arrived.

As I read further, I learned the other half of the story. In her senior year of high school, Phoebe was planning for college, and was even considering going to school overseas, but was facing intense opposition from her family. They had told her not to bother applying since she would obviously fail, and that studying in Europe was completely out of the question. She had been on the point of giving up. She’d started to believe she was just a failure who didn’t deserve to be happy.

When I spoke to her, I changed her life.

Phoebe said that feeling at least one person believed in her gave her the confidence to apply for college, something she is sure she would not have done

otherwise. Not only that, she applied to University College Dublin in Ireland, where she was accepted, and double majored in archeology and art history. Her life continued to blossom from there; she traveled the world, visiting over fifteen countries, and taught in an orphanage in India. She said she had always admired me for unapologetically being myself, and she was learning to grow into her own person as well, regardless of what anyone else might think.

All from one, short sentence.

I believe in you.

At the time, I didn't know any of this. I had no idea what she was trying to do or why she was so upset, but it was my instinct to try and make things better in some small way. I'd have done the same for anyone, friend or stranger, in that moment. Usually, you don't realize the true impact your words and actions have on other people, but in this rare instance, I got to find out. If something so small could make such an enormous difference in someone's life, imagine the ripples you create in the world daily. Use that power wisely, and above all, use it kindly. Kindness is never wasted.

A Moment that Lasts a Lifetime

Finalist

By Keabetswe Leshoe

Bound by the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic Ocean lies the beautiful land of Africa. Many call it the Mother Land, some say it is that continent that looks like a question mark, and a few, including myself at some point, have considered its shape to be like that of a lopsided ice cream cone, with some scoops leaning heavily to the left. To me, it is the continent that carries my birthplace: South Africa.

South Africa has great natural beauty, eleven official languages, rich natural resources, and is the only country in the world to include another country within its borders. Another thing I love is the horizontal 'Y' shape on the flag which represents a once divided nation converging and working together in harmony.

South Africa was given its nickname "Rainbow Nation" to acknowledge its attempts to create a semblance of unity, (also called 'Ubuntu' (Xhosa), 'Botho' (Sotho and Setswana), 'Vanhu' (Shona), 'Vhuthu' (Venda), 'Mensdom' (Afrikaans)), in an ethnic diverse country after apartheid ended in 1994.

Born in a small town called Mahikeng, I started learning at a young age that you do not have to know someone to greet them. We refer to this as Ubuntu, a Xhosa word which translates to "I am because we are..."

At first it did not make sense to me, but as time went on and I got older, I understood that in my culture, everyone is your mother, everyone is your father, everyone is your sister, and everyone is your brother. I was to treat everyone, outside of the house I grew up in, with the same respect as those who lived outside of it.

Growing up, I had a lot of book smarts which a lot of my peers found to be a little more than they could handle. Because of my intelligence, it was hard to make friends. I felt alone, even though I was surrounded by a crowd of people every day.

One Sunday afternoon while we were at church, right after the service had ended, I noticed that my mother was going through the same thing as myself. Men and women that we attended church with would greet the ladies my mother was standing with, but not her. How she responded was inspiring to me.

She greeted them after they walked past her. Not sarcastically, but in the same manner she had greeted the ladies she was with. As we were in the car driving home, the sun caressed my face as the wind from my open window fanned me.

Normally on a sunny day, my thighs “stick” to the car seat, but my skin was sitting pretty on the car seat. We passed by the usual sceneries when heading home from church: two gas stations, some trees, and nice houses; some with nice gardens and some gated with a high wall. It was a great day.

I asked her why she did that, and she responded, with a calm and inviting voice, by saying, “Madume ha a rekesiwe (saying hello does not cost anything; being kind and respectful does not cost anything), and no matter how people may treat you in life, always be respectful because that is how you were raised.”

I went back to school the next day, which was Monday of course, and that was the first day of the rest of my life where I eventually made new friends, lasting memories, and left a footprint at the school that many uses as a stepping stool to this day: kindness is the best form of humanity.

That moment I shared with my mother has made me into the woman I am today. Because of that moment, I have been complimented on my kindness and my manners wherever I travelled, whether it was in China or here in Virginia and even back home in South Africa, and I thank my mother every day for that moment; a moment that lasts a lifetime.

A Tale of Two Toys

Finalist

By Douglass “Puck” S. Hall

If I were not a white man, my evening could have ended violently. The three police officers could have beaten and arrested me. Those three police officers aimed their firearms at your foolish narrator. They were prepared to take lethal action. I did an incredibly stupid thing, but I did not deserve to lose my life. In other circumstances, different cops did not afford countless people of color the opportunity to explain their situations. Their contact with the police was lethal. Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old African American boy, made a mistake similar to mine and it cost him his life.

From out of nowhere but suddenly everywhere, three police cruisers roared into the gas station parking lot at the intersection of Emmet and Ivy Road. Each cruiser zoomed in from a different direction. Bright lights and piercing sirens assaulted me. Had someone called 9-1-1? But, we were only there a few minutes. Pulsing blue and red stung my vision. I was shocked. Why were the cops here? How did they get here so fast? My eyes adjusted. Three officers surrounded me. They took cover behind their vehicles with their guns drawn and trained on yours truly.

“Drop your weapon! Hands in the air!” the officers screamed. It was a cool night, but beads of sweat ran down my forehead. My throat tightened, and my heart banged against my chest. The parking lot spun around me. I felt sick.

It was May 2006, when the UVA students who resided on campus were required to move out. Months earlier, I threw my lot in with 120 people on a rural commune. On paper, we were poor, though this never felt true. My friends and I sneaked behind grocery stores and jumped into dumpsters, looking for passable food. We literally feasted upon the trash. We were resourceful, and we found the things we needed in the garbage. This was a special day. Praise Dump-Ra! It was the annual UVA Dumpster Dive.

“There’s gold in the streets,” my friend Daxus said as he prepared me for the mission. He was thirty years older than me, and in the dumpster diving battlefield he had graduated from a cadet to general. Dax spread out a map of Charlottesville and circled areas of the map with a marker. These were parking lots of UVA dormitories. “Yar, here be dumpsters” he said, impersonating a pirate.

Four friends and I shuffled into a derelict cargo van and were dispatched to the city in search of the treasures to be found among the items hastily discarded in the exodus. None of the van’s windows could fully roll up. The wind blasted us as the van lurched down the highway. The day followed a pattern: each time we pulled into a dormitory parking lot next to the dumpster that was placed there the day prior, Elona and I scrambled into a dumpster, Mary stayed out to catch, while Maddog kept watch. Cardin, our getaway driver, helped Mary. Elona and I hoisted the “good scores” over the edge of the dumpster, while Mary and Cardin loaded the van. Maddog alerted us when he spotted campus security, and we departed for the next dormitory.

From the mountains of waste, we rescued lamps, couches, rugs, laundry detergent, shampoo, soap, mini-fridges, mattresses, stereos, couches, tables, chairs, desks, televisions, clothing, lingerie, hats, sunglasses, fifty dollars, uneaten food, coffee, unopened beers, marijuana, and bottles of liquor. What we found in those dumpsters dumbfounded me. I could not imagine the life of a UVA student with so much material wealth that so many things could be disposable. What we took did not belong in a landfill. We made four trips from the city and back. At the final dumpster we excavated the remnants of some costume party. The van was full, but we forced the costumes and props into the van. During our adventures, we emptied the gas tank.

Cardin pulled the van alongside a gas pump at the intersection of Emmet and Ivy Road. We spilled out of the van and so did the costumes and props. Feeling festive, I adorned a green leprechaun’s hat, a pair of New Year’s 2005 glittery glasses, and I picked up the black plastic gun that also fell out. I lit a cigarette and paced around the parking lot while waiting.

* * *

Twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was playing a game of “cops and robbers” with friends in his neighborhood on a November day in Cleveland, 2014. He played this game with a black toy gun, not dissimilar to the one I picked up. Tamir’s toy gun lacked the orange tip that could have indicated it was a harmless piece of plastic, as did mine. Someone called 9-1-1. A police officer shot and killed Tamir immediately after arriving. Tamir’s game was innocent. I was a grown white man who spent the day deliberately trespassing on university grounds. My friends and I premeditated this crime from our home outside the city. Tamir was an African American boy who played a children’s game with his friends, in his own neighborhood.

* * *

I dropped the plastic gun on the pavement. My hands were in the air, and I yelled, “It’s plastic! It’s a toy gun!” After a few terrifying moments, the officers lowered their weapons and approached me. I was told that I was stupid, that I was lucky, and that there could have been a grimmer outcome. I was told to “stay out of Charlottesville.” I was not searched, beaten, restrained in a sleeper hold, or arrested. I threw the toy gun into a trashcan by the gas pump, where it belonged. I went home that night, with a story to tell. This naïve and unwise narrator was lucky. My story is an illustration of white privilege. White people who do stupid things go home with a warning. In similar situations, people of color are treated with hostility, are often arrested, and are sometimes killed before the police ask any questions.

Burnt Toast

Finalist

By Thomas Caven

Everyone has failed in pursuing their dream, even if it was just a minor setback or a hiccup and not a total failure. No matter the reason for the failure, whether it was because you were overconfident, underprepared, or just an old-fashioned whoopsie, being able to overcome the failure is the path to success. I still remember what I thought to be my first big failure

This was what I knew I wanted to do. Maybe not exactly, but my foot was in the door. I was sixteen and had gotten my first job in a kitchen. I was only making salads and plating desserts, but you have to start somewhere.

The restaurant was named “Obrigado”, which means “thank you” in Portuguese, but I don’t think anyone in Louisa would have known that. The restaurant was completely out of place. It was a retrofitted store room turned into a kitchen. Jade and Debbie had taken a big risk in spending all that money to open the restaurant where they did.

They were also taking a chance in hiring me. I had taken the culinary arts classes in school, but I had no real experience to speak of. Making something to eat for my little brother really did not count. He was almost three and he would have eaten anything.

It was my first Friday night. Anyone who knows anything about restaurants, they know that this was primetime. I honestly thought it would have been an easy night. How many people in the backwoods town are going to come out to eat calamari and brazinni at a restaurant in the middle of nowhere? A lot of people, that’s how many.

I was completely overwhelmed. I had salads stacked everywhere. Most of them were ready and waiting on other appetizers, but some of them were big salads that were waiting on the entrees. I thought I had everything in order despite all the chaos going on around me.

“Bread!”, yelled Lydia from around the corner. There wasn't any time for pleasantries, let alone full sentences. I had to warm up the bread for the servers along with everything else that I was responsible for. That meant I had to leave my station to get the bread from the back.

“Sunny south and a caesar!”, Jade yelled as soon as I entered the pantry. Once again, there was no complete sentence. I got the bread and quickly put it straight in the oven.

“Dessert ticket”, Debbie said as she put the paper on my station. It was a big table and they were all getting something different. I pushed out the desserts fairly quickly while getting Jade the salads she had asked for. I finally had a moment to breathe.

“Where’s that bread?”, screamed Lydia. Not only did she sound pissed, she had used a complete sentence. I rushed to the oven and opened it up. Thick black smoke smacked me in the face and choked my lungs. That bread was toast.

My first big night and I had screwed up. The rest of the shift had gone relatively smooth, but the smell of the burnt bread lingered in my nostrils as a constant reminder that I had messed up. Nothing else had gotten burnt that night, except for my pride.

Later that night during clean up, Lydia pulled me to the side and gave me a pep talk, but it didn’t make me feel any better. Jade and Debbie didn’t say anything to me about it before they went into the back office. You always know you did something really bad when no one chastizes you for an obvious mistake. I just knew they were going to decide that they had made a mistake in hiring me. How good of a cook could I have been if I was burning premade bread?

Jade made her way out of the office on her way home. This was it. I knew I was about to get fired.

“Go home and get some sleep. We have a band coming to play tomorrow night. It should be even busier than it was tonight,” was all she said to me on the way out. She didn’t fire me. I was going to come back the next day, and there was going to be a live band. I loved music. I had hoped I would get a chance to hear them play. I didn’t.

I ended up working there for the next two years until I graduated from high school. I had burned more than just that first loaf of bread. Every time I had failed, I had learned. Every time I learned, I got better. Eventually I wasn't burning anything. It all depends on how you bounce back. After all, there is no point in giving up over some burnt toast.

Nahor

Finalist

By Austen Coogan

It's 8:20 at night and I rush out the door through the cold winter air. As usual I'm running late for band practice at my friend Brady's house, which starts 20 minutes ago. I can't afford my own car yet, so after a quick sprint down the driveway I jump into my Mom's Toyota Rav 4. Being a teenage guy who drives his mother's car is already embarrassing, but it doesn't help that her license plate proudly says "WHIMZCL" (unlike her, I don't have a very "whimsical" personality). I hit the ignition and after a moment of shivering, the engine coughs itself awake. I quickly put on a generic Spotify playlist, and the car and I start speeding to Brady's house for band practice.

This routine drive is different than usual because we aren't coming from our house. Instead, we're coming from the home of the Basingers, a family in our church that leads a home group Bible study. Since we're coming from there, the GPS says a shortcut through the nearby Nahor road will take us to Brady's about 10 minutes faster than usual. The drive just started and I'm already 20 minutes, so this shortcut seems like a no-brainer. We exit the driveway, and at the next turn the car and I pull onto Nahor.

Aside from the shortcut, everything's normal at this point: the music's at full volume, WHIMZCL is driving fine, and my running-more-late-than-last-time anxiety is breaking another record. But after roughly two minutes of driving, a large white sign comes up in the headlights. "END STATE MAINTAINENCE" it says, and beyond it the road narrows to a single lane of gravel.

Now I've only been driving for a few months, so I don't have much experience. I know every driver has moments where their wisdom and skills behind the wheel are put to the test, but I haven't had any such moments yet. However, upon seeing that white sign, my instincts immediately suggest we turn around. Under normal circumstances we could, but right now we're too late; there's just no time for another route. Plus, the GPS

says in three miles we'll turn off Nahor onto a more familiar road close to Brady's house. We can press on.

For the next mile or so the gravel road stays tight with a few potholes, but then we pass by a few houses running close alongside the road. Their lights are off, only illuminated by Whimzy's faint headlights. Honestly, I'm starting to wonder if the GPS led us onto private property. I seriously don't want tired, angry country folk to burst out their creepy off-the-grid cabins and shoot me for trespassing. Whatever – we can't go back now, or I'll be 45 minutes late to practice. Only two more miles until we turn off Nahor anyway; we can make it.

As we drive the road becomes increasingly foreboding. Eventually, we stumble into a little clearing in the woods. Past that Nahor turns extremely narrow, with just enough room for little WHIMZCL to crawl on through. The GPS says 1.0 miles now, and again my instincts recommend we turn around. 0.9 miles and the gravel fades into a trail of dirt. 0.8 miles: the ground begins rising on both sides of us. 0.7 miles: the ground climbs high enough that we're now driving in a car-deep trench. 0.6 miles: the malevolent trench is now too narrow to turn around. 0.5 miles: I lower the music's volume to help me focus. 0.4 miles: sinister tree limbs in the trench reach out and claw poor Whimzy's windshield. 0.3 miles: the road turns muddy. Very muddy. Too muddy...

Ahead I see a menacingly large mud puddle threatening to swallow WHIMZCL's tires. We stop briefly so I can stare at it and think. This is it. This is the moment where I'm tested. Despite the alarming circumstances, something surprises me: I feel calm. I'm running incredibly late and I'm three miles deep on a clearly forsaken road with no easy way out, and yet I feel calm. I feel focused. I feel confident, even. With this peace of mind, I start weighing our options: Little Whimzy is only front wheel drive, and it's quite possible she'd get stuck in the mud if we went forward. But on the other hand, turning back now would be incredibly difficult and make us nearly an hour late. Should we risk the puddle, or back out and accept being even later?

After a moment, the right choice becomes clear: we can't risk being stuck. Getting out would require I either call me parents to come, or walk a mile in the dark to the nearest haunted cabin. Honestly, I'm not sure which is worse. Plus, by the time

WHIMZCL was free, practice would be over anyway. Even though I'm 0.3 miles away, I reluctantly text the band saying I'll be an hour late. The trench has no room to turn around, so Whimzy and I must drive in reverse for several minutes. Only her reverse lights illuminate our path backward, but after narrowly dodging trees for a few minutes, we eventually reach the clearing we passed earlier. With room to turn around, we can finally drive out the rest of Nahor. Good riddance.

Eventually, we arrive at Brady's house after taking the normal route. Upon entering, the band gives me a round of applause for being so prompt. I start telling them what happened, and Brady's father suddenly says, "Oh yeah! I've been on that road. Some mean people live back there. It's a good thing you turned around; you definitely would have been stuck."

You might think I was frustrated during practice. Actually, I was rather proud. Sure – in the grand scheme of life, that 40-minute drive may seem rather insignificant. But in that ominous trench my driving maturity was truly tested for the first time. And I wasn't proud because I passed the test. I was proud because I passed it calmly.

Once Bitten

Finalist

By Benjamin Marcus

I have never been an especially zoophobic person. Even as a child, I would feel compelled to take a closer look at almost any arachnid or reptile that I encountered. I would often entertain the idea of keeping five-foot snakes instead of more traditional house pets. On rarer occasions, I entertained the fantasy of keeping a giant tarantula for a pet. I have never actually owned any such creatures and so have yet to achieve that stereotype of the teenaged entomologist with entire rooms of his parents' house devoted to keeping his insects and arachnids. Nor is that something I find desirable now — if I ever did. I have, mostly, shed these interests with age. When looking back on my childhood fascination — in arachnids specifically — I find myself perplexed that it took me so long to get over it those interests when I really should have learned some amount of arachnophobia when I was much younger.

When I was three, my parents were still outsourcing my education (I was homeschooled for most of my life) to the International School of Charlottesville. My most vivid recollections of the school are of the playground out back where we would have recess. My activities there varied, from trying to eat the lawn to hiding inside of a large plastic flower pot to digging around in the mulch under the play structures. I was doing the last of these that I found the spider who by all rights should have given me several years of arachnophobia.

I was sitting alone underneath one of the play structures, pretending to be a chef and using the mulch to represent some condiment or other. No other children were around to be make-believe restaurant-goers, but I liked to give some story to my actions no matter what. After a little time, I grabbed a handful of mulch and revealed a small, black spider.

My parents had always been quite accommodating toward my love of snatching any tiny creature that caught my fancy and bringing it over to show them. The only real concern they ever seemed to have about it was the effect I was having on the unfortunate

victim of my interest. It felt only natural to me on that day to catch the black spider and bring it to the nearest equivalent of a parent: the teacher responsible for keeping an eye on the children during recess.

I scooped the spider up in one hand and waddled off to show the teacher, whom I could see standing some distance from the playground. I wanted to show her the interesting-looking spider I had found so as to receive the standard forced enthusiasm and pat on the head. I thought the spider looked interesting simply because of how uniformly dark it appeared; I did not see the telltale red hourglass on the underside of its abdomen. It took the black widow until just after I managed to get over the concrete border of the playground to have enough and bite me. I had felt pain before as a child several times at that point. Nor was it the first time another living creature had attacked me. My parents' cats, while sweet most of the time, were not creatures of infinite patience. Still, that was the first time a spider had ever attacked me, and it was agonizing. I cannot describe the feeling brought on by the venom; my memory of events becomes rather broken after that point. The clearest thought I can remember is my panicked attempt to figure out what to do. I am not sure why dropping the spider wasn't my immediate reaction, but I did not let go. I realized I was in serious need of an adult, and so my journey across the grass toward the supervisor continued — no longer hoping to show her something I had found, but in the desperate need of help.

When I reached her, I opened my hand to show her the spider, much as I had been planning to before being bitten. "I found this," I said. "I think it bit me."

I do not remember how she reacted to my showing her an extremely venomous spider and saying I had been bitten. I, in fact, remember little between then and being taken into an ambulance. I was taken to the hospital and treated for the bite. I remember being in great pain during that time and still aching when I spent the night in a hospital bedroom. I do not remember much else after that except for what happened when I asked after the spider's fate. I was informed that my teacher had trapped it in a zip lock bag and crushed it under her foot. I felt overcome with guilt that I had brought about the execution of a creature whose only crime was fearing me.

The agony and fear that I felt because I had picked up that spider were not enough to make me repent, nor was the guilt I felt that my curiosity had killed it. I still grabbed interesting-looking spiders almost every time I found one, although I was more careful to choose defenseless targets.

I have only seen one black widow since that day when I was around seven years old. It was living in a cracked concrete wall that I passed, and I stopped to look at it. Unlike that first black widow, this one was displaying its hourglass in full view, so I knew immediately that it was the same sort of spider that likely almost killed my three-year-old self. It looked small. I watched it for a while feeling nothing but a detached interest. It occurred to me I should be scared of this creature. Even if I wasn't scared of all spiders, its dead predecessor should have at least taught me some respect. I did my best to pretend to be frightened as I repositioned myself to get a closer look.

Running and the Effects that it had on my Life

Finalist

By Stephanie Murran

I have never been a runner in fact I thought running was a senseless exercise. How could someone enjoy running anywhere for no reason? It seemed hard and unnecessary. That is until my world collapsed. From seemingly nowhere I had an intense desire to go outside and start to run. I know now where that desire came from. It was my internal drive to feel good and to stave off the depression that pushed me out the door. It was my intuition. Running has restored my happiness, calmness, sanity, and self.

Beginning in November of 2019 my life as I knew it began to crumble. For the previous 20 years I had spent my life as a mother, wife, and entrepreneur. After my partner and I unexpectedly decided to part ways, the ground fell from below me. I was lost. Suddenly, I was a single mother, but a mother only half of the time, prior to this I was with my children every day. I needed to figure out so much; where was my life headed, what do I do when my kids are with their father. What about meeting new people and dating? And then there was all day-to-day things. The places where my ex fit in, now I had to figure out how to do the things that he did. Which admittedly wasn't that much but it was still something. I was overwhelmed, depressed, confused and just broken. For the first year and almost a half I cried a lot. Probably more than I have ever cried in my life. The pain that I felt every single time that I had to hand my kids over to my ex was unbearable.

I tried many vices to help me get through the devastating implosion of my family and my dreams. Many of which did help, including therapy, yoga, massage, acupuncture, and a lot of other self-care. And some which seemed to help but did not, like spending way too much time out with my friends drinking. I called it the year of Stephanie. And fortunately, I was able to indulge. But with all of that, I still felt broken. I was suffering, and, even worse, my kids were suffering, which made my suffering infinitely more. I absolutely needed to get through this for them and for me. Although I

did the best to hide it, sometimes it was impossible. I couldn't continue to show them the broken me. I had to rise up, be strong and be an inspiration for them.

Through the years I had a gym membership. Mostly as a place to go and walk on the treadmill, binge watch something and zone out. One day in March 2021— yes very recently—I decided to step it up and run a bit. It was a struggle, but I knew that it was what I needed to do. The first run that I have recorded on my phone was March 22 with a pace of 16.34, a cadence of 130 and 2.72 miles. I can't really explain it, but I was hooked. It felt good I felt powerful. On March 25 I went to Ragged Mountain Running Shop, Charlottesville's oldest running shop and invested in my first pair of running sneakers! I walked in the store, explained that I have never run before but have started running to feel good. She asked me what I run in, I said "these" and pointed down to my adidas (not running sneakers by any means) she laughed. She fitted me with the perfect pair of running sneakers and I have not turned back since that day.

I have run through the breakup of my family. As the saying goes, "you can't go under it, you can't go over it, you must go through it." I am happy to say that I am on the other side. I attribute it to many things but mostly to my running. I never know what is going to happen emotionally during each run. I almost get excited when it's time for my runs to see what will happen that day. I have had days where I write complete stories in my head, and days where I get so incredibly angry at my ex and about my situation that I run with my middle fingers out the whole time. I've had days where I have just broken down and cried, sometimes so hard that I had to stop my run. Whatever emotion needs to come through comes through, and sometimes with a vengeance. It is an incredible feeling, to know that I have control over my emotions in a healthy and effective way. It's not always easy in fact it's mostly never easy. A lot of my runs I question why am I doing this, I can't do this, I am not a runner, what are you doing? But 100% without fail my after run feelings answer all of the questions wholeheartedly.

In July I ran 100 miles to raise funds for St. Jude's, I ran my first 5k race in September and am running a 10 miler in October. My 5k time was 9.47 minutes per mile. Considering that just 6 months ago I was at 16.34, I would say I am proud of myself. I am super excited to research this topic and to discover the mechanisms behind

how and why running has been such a blessing for me. Running is my new best friend; it is always there for me when I need it and it always makes me feel good. If I begin to feel like I am not fast enough or run long enough, I remember why I began this journey and run!

Swim Lesson

Finalist

By Roger Newman

My mother once told me: "If someone is willing to teach you something, go ahead and learn it. Especially if it's free. You never know when it might come in handy." When people learn something new, they often ask: "When in my life am I going to need this?" I heard it when I was going to school and many times as a GED tutor. What I tell them is: "You can't tell the future, You don't know what's going to happen the rest of your life. I don't know when you might need this and neither do you. Isn't it better to know than not? What does it hurt to learn?"

After my mom and dad divorced, my mom needed a job, and she got one at a place called the Jewish Community Center (JCC). The JCC is like a YMCA for Jewish people. Even though my family isn't Jewish, one of the perks of the job was free childcare. Everyday after school, I went to the JCC for daycare. Daycare offered specialized classes on different things. Mom signed me up for three: Gymnastics, piano, and swim lessons.

Gym was fun. We used some pretty cool equipment, and we learned how to do flips and tumbles. Piano was fine. I learned to play music, and the teacher was a music-loving hippy, so I had fun there. Swimming was the hardest. It was a lot of work learning the different strokes and practicing constantly. You even had to learn a special way to breathe. Mostly, I just didn't want to do it. I think my bad attitude about it made me hate it even more. I begged my mom to let me drop it. She explained to me that she had always wanted to learn to swim and regretted never having the opportunity, So, because I did (and it was free), I had to do it. I thought it was a worthless thing that was not going to help me. But she wanted me to do it, so I did.

Fast-forward five years to my Junior year of high school. The year was finishing up, and I needed to get some money for gas and girls and having fun. Some of my friends were getting jobs in retail and fast-food, but I didn't want to do that. I heard about this place that had a pool, some basketball courts, and a picnic area. They needed

lifeguards for the summer, and I figured it would be pretty easy. I'd be hanging out in the sun, looking at cute girls, and making some money. The only problem was that I had to be lifeguard-certified by taking a ten week class, and I wasn't.

I told my mom what I wanted to do, and she told me that her work offered a certification class that was just starting, so I signed up. In this class, we learned things like CPR, and how to get someone out of the pool while protecting their neck. After ten weeks, I passed the class without a problem. I got the job, and was looking forward to summer in the sun.

The place where I worked hosted parties for businesses. For a fee, a company could rent the place for a get-together of its employees. They would hire a caterer, have food and drinks, and swim and play basketball. I got hired in May, and my first couple of days were training. Then, I had to lifeguard one of these parties.

It was a hot day in late May, and the party was a few hours in. There were a few people swimming, but most were eating, playing ball, and having a few drinks. The company had hired a beer truck, so the booze was flowing. It got hotter as the day went on, and more people were getting in the pool. The water was cold because it hadn't been hot for many days, so the pool hadn't warmed up.

A group of guys had been playing Basketball, and decided to cool off in the pool. This one fellow came into the pool area looking red as a tomato. He had been drinking beers and playing ball. He was going at it like he thought he was Michael Jordan, and he had overheated in the hot sun. He walked into the pool area, kicked off his shoes, stripped off his shirt, and jumped into the pool. He sank like a stone.

The water was so cold, and he was so overheated that when he jumped in, he went into shock and passed out. He had been loud coming into the pool, yelling and carrying on, so the other lifeguard and I were already watching him. He was closer to me, so I blew my whistle and dove in after him. The other guard cleared the pool out, called 911, and helped me get the guy out of the pool. He had to be taken out in a certain way, so, if he has spinal damage, you don't make it worse. It's easier with two people.

We got him out, and laid him down to check and see if he was still breathing. He wasn't, so we started CPR. About two breaths in, he started making a funny gurgling sound, and began throwing up beer and pool water. We turned his head, so he wouldn't choke. He started breathing on his own. The paramedics came and took him to the hospital, and the police came to fill out a report. The party was stopped, and we closed the pool, cleaned up, and went home. The next day, our boss told us the guy would be fine. The rest of the summer passed uneventfully.

Because I learned something I didn't want to, I ended up with a pretty fun summer job, and probably saved someone's life. Life takes us places we can't imagine. Learn all you can, especially if it's free. You could end up having fun with it, or doing something important.

Under Pressure

Finalist

By Gavin Miller

There I was--clinging to a thin metal cable, 60 feet underwater off the coast of Hawai'i. The deep, clear, soundless blue stretched around me for what seemed like miles in every direction. But I wasn't admiring the view. I had been slowly working my way down the lifeline for ten minutes when suddenly, a pounding headache hit me. My head felt like it was blowing up like a balloon from the inside; my body was refusing to equalize!

Back in 2018, I was 15 years old. My family had been planning a trip to Hawai'i for five years, and the time had finally come! We set forth on our voyage in mid-October. My Dad and I had heard amazing things about the scuba experiences off the island of Oahu (where my family and I were staying), so in preparation, we had earned our PADI Open Water Diver certificates that summer. He had decided to make this trip a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so he booked a diving session for the two of us with a local charter company. This wasn't any old diving session though. We were to sail a mile off the coast and dive 107 feet deep to explore the abandoned wreck of a WWII Navy Corsair.

However, the drastic change in climate from chilly Virginia to sunny Honolulu was not kind to my allergies. The charter had a very strict rule--they would not take anybody with a head cold or congestion issues on one of their trips because the client would have difficulty "equalizing."

Equalizing is a procedure all divers must undergo. At the surface, you experience only the weight of the atmosphere resting upon you (1 atm.) But for every 33 feet deep you dive, you experience the weight of an additional atmosphere pressing down on you. To counter the effects of this massive outside pressure, you must make the inside pressure of your body equal to the outside pressure (equalizing). You do this by holding your nose and blowing into it, or by wiggling your jaw--exactly as you would if you were driving up or down a tall mountain and you began to feel the change in altitude. You

must do this frequently the deeper you go, otherwise the pressure buildup inside your skull will burst your eardrums.

Dad and I weren't going to let a couple snuffles stop us though, so early Wednesday morning we set out on the little charter skiff to the site of the wreck. Our oxygen tanks would empty exponentially faster than they would at the surface due to the enormous pressure at that depth (3 atm!), so our dive could last no longer than 30 minutes. As Dad and I began to descend the dive line, we could see the Corsair, half buried in the smooth white sand below. It looked as small as a Matchbox airplane. Then, about halfway down the line, my ears wouldn't equalize!

I held my hand out flat and shook it to signal to my Dad that there was a problem. He waited patiently while I anxiously tried to clear my head of the excess pressure--it was very painful, like a migraine--you feel like there are angry hornets trapped behind your forehead, pushing, struggling to escape. Every second we wasted on that line was a precious second that could've been spent exploring the wreck-but my Dad faithfully waited for me to equalize. Finally, after what seemed like hours of gulping and blowing into my face mask, my clogged sinuses cleared and my ears opened with what seemed like an explosive pop--and we were on our way! We still got to enjoy five minutes of exploring the rusted, eel-infested plane, despite having wasted so much time on the lifeline.

Equalizing is a crucial skill for all divers to have--and it should be an essential coping skill for land-lubbers too. What do you do when pressure shows up in your life? How do you equalize to cope with the effects of stress and pressure at home, work, or school? Do you call up a close friend and tell them about your day? Do you go for a walk or run, or take a nap to help your body and mind reset? My exhortation to you today is to think over what you do in times of stress and hardship, and single out that relief. Single out that cure that allows you to take your mind off the bustle of everyday life. Single out that cure that helps you take the time to enjoy the life around you. Remember it, and use it to equalize your life when the pressure surrounding you becomes too great.